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Apparatus and Method for Laminating Three-Dimensional Surfaces

Field of Invention

The invention pertains to laminating techniques. More particularly, the invention relates to equipment and methods for laminating veneers to hand or machine carved three-dimensional substrates.

Background of the Invention

Various types of machines and methods have been developed for laminating veneers and similar materials onto substrate surfaces; incorporating a number of different technologies. U.S. Patent No. 5,716,488 issued to *Bryant* is directed to a reusable vacuum bag for making laminated articles wherein the bag is evacuated after layers with applied thermosetting resin are stacked upon a forming surface of a forming tool. After the bag has been evacuated, the plastic bag sheet portion of the bag is firmly pressed against the forming tool, thus forming the materials to the shape of the forming surface.

U.S. Patent No. 4,447,282 issued to *Valerio et al.*, describes a process and equipment for a veneer press to glue a thin layer on a variously shaped panel surface. The veneer is formed by gluing a thin wood layer to a panel. A flexible rubber sheet is placed over the thin wood layer is sealed by means of lower plate in order to form a chamber. Where a vacuum is formed between the lower plate and the flexible rubber sheet, a resultant external pressure causes the thin wood layer to be adhered to the panel conforming to the shape of panel.

U.S. Patent No. 5,401,349, issued to *Goetz et al.* is directed to the production of shaped articles and utilizes a technique that includes "vacuum bagging". The process involves placing prepreg laminates onto a support surface and then covering the laminates with a gas impermeable film. When the space between the support surface and the cover film is evacuated, and the system raised to some elevated temperature, a laminated shaped article is formed.

U.S. Patent No. 6,242,078 B1 issued to *Pommer et al.* describes a high-density printed circuit substrate and a method of fabrication. The use of an evacuated plastic bag is part of the procedure for processing polymer-coated base laminates. The Patent describes the process wherein the vacuum is applied to the book using either a vacuum enclosed press or by placing each laminate in a sealable bag and drawing a vacuum on the individual laminate during the press cycle.

U.S. Patent No. 6,152,840 issued to *Baum* is directed to a composite baseball bat with a cavitied core. The bat is produced by first shaping a plank into a semi-cylindrical configuration to form a preform. In order to do this, the plank is saturated with a liquid solvent and then shaped into the semi-cylindrical form in either matched dies or one die using a vacuum bag to pressure the plank against the die as the plank is heated to drive off the solvent. While other variations exist, the above-described designs for laminating veneers and similar materials onto substrate surfaces are typical of those encountered in the prior art.

It is an objective of the present invention to provide an apparatus and method for laminating veneers and similar materials onto substrates having three-dimensional surface features. It is a further objective to provide such capabilities without requiring the creation of special custom forms and supports. It is a still further objective of the invention to provide the above-described capabilities in a manner that minimizes the risk of damaging the veneer or

related material during the laminating process. It is yet a further objective to provide methods that may be used with a wide variety of laminating materials in an inexpensive and durable machine which is capable of extended duty cycles and that may be easily repaired and maintained.

While some of the objectives of the present invention are disclosed in the prior art, none of the inventions found include all of the requirements identified.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention addresses all of the deficiencies of prior art apparatus and methods for laminating three-dimensional surfaces and satisfies all of the objectives described above.

An apparatus for laminating three-dimensional surfaces providing the desired features may be constructed from the following components. A substrate is provided. The substrate is formed of rigid material and has an upper surface, a lower surface and a first perimeter. Means are provided for forming three-dimensional features, commencing at the upper surface, that extend downwardly toward the lower surface. A veneer is provided. The veneer is formed of thin, resilient material and has a top surface and a bottom surface.

Glue is provided. The glue is suitable for adhering the veneer to the substrate and is applied to the bottom surface of the veneer. The veneer is positioned upon the substrate. Means are provided for applying pressure to the top surface of the veneer to conform the veneer to the substrate. When the glue has dried, the veneer will be adhered to the upper surface of the substrate and will reflect the three-dimensional features of the substrate.

In a variant of the invention, the three-dimensional features of the substrate are produced by manual carving of the upper surface of the substrate. In another variant, the three-dimensional features of the substrate are produced by application of powered rotary cutting and grinding tools to the upper surface of the substrate. In yet another variant, the three-dimensional features of the substrate are produced by computer-controlled contouring machinery.

In a further variant of the invention, the substrate material is selected from the group comprising: wood, particleboard, chipboard, plastic, metal and cellular materials. In yet a further variant, the veneer material is selected from the group comprising: wood, burl wood, plastic and metal.

In another variant, the means for applying pressure to the top surface of the veneer to conform it to the substrate includes an airtight, flexible container. The flexible container has a sealable opening sized and shaped to admit the substrate with the veneer located upon it. Means are provided for evacuating the air from the container. When the substrate with the veneer located upon it is inserted into the container, the container sealed, and the air evacuated from the container, atmospheric pressure will conform the veneer to the upper surface of the substrate.

A method for laminating three-dimensional surfaces includes the following steps. Providing a substrate. The substrate is formed of rigid material and has an upper surface, a lower surface and a first perimeter. Forming three-dimensional features commencing at the upper surface of the substrate. The three-dimensional features extend downwardly toward the lower surface. Providing a veneer. The veneer is formed of thin, resilient material and has a top surface and a bottom surface. Applying glue to the bottom surface of the veneer that is

suitable for adhering the veneer to the substrate. Positioning the veneer upon the substrate. Applying pressure to the top surface of the veneer to conform the veneer to the substrate. When the glue has dried, the veneer will be adhered to the upper surface of the substrate and will reflect the three-dimensional features of the substrate.

An appreciation of the other aims and objectives of the present invention and an understanding of it may be achieved by referring to the accompanying drawings and the detailed description of a preferred embodiment.

Description of the Drawings

Figure 1 is a perspective view of a substrate having three-dimensional upper surface features;

Figure 2 is a side elevation of the substrate with a veneer positioned above the upper surface;

Figure 3 is a side elevation of the preferred embodiment of the invention illustrating the substrate and veneer inside of a vacuum bag with the bag being evacuated by a vacuum pump;

Figure 4 is a perspective view of the three-dimensional features of the upper surface of the substrate being carved with a hand tool;

Figure 5 is a perspective view of the three-dimensional features of the upper surface of the substrate being carved with an hand-held power tool; and

Figure 6 is a perspective view of the three-dimensional features of the upper surface of the substrate being carved with a three-axis machine tool.

Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiment

Figures 1-6 illustrate an apparatus for laminating three-dimensional surfaces **10**. The apparatus **10** includes the following components. A substrate **14** is provided. The substrate **14** is formed of rigid material and has an upper surface **18**, a lower surface **22** and a first perimeter **26**. Means **30** are provided for forming three-dimensional features **34**, commencing at the upper surface **18**, that extend downwardly toward the lower surface **22**. A veneer **38** is provided. The veneer **38** is formed of thin, resilient material and has a top surface **42** and a bottom surface **46**.

Glue **50** is provided. The glue **50** is suitable for adhering the veneer **38** to the substrate **14** and is applied to the bottom surface **46** of the veneer **38**. The veneer **38** is positioned upon the substrate **14**. Means **54** are provided for applying pressure **58** to the top surface **42** of the veneer **38** to conform the veneer **38** to the substrate **14**. When the glue **50** has dried, the veneer **38** will be adhered to the upper surface **18** of the substrate **14** and will reflect the three-dimensional features of the substrate **14**.

In a variant of the invention, as illustrated in **Figure 4**, the three-dimensional features **34** of the substrate **14** are produced by manual carving **62** of the upper surface **18** of the substrate **14**. In another variant, as illustrated in **Figure 5**, the three-dimensional features **34** of the substrate **14** are produced by application of powered rotary cutting and grinding tools **66** to the upper surface **18** of the substrate **14**. In yet another variant, as illustrated in **Figure 6**, the three-dimensional features **34** of the substrate **14** are produced by computer-controlled contouring machinery **70**.